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SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN LIBERAL PARTY: "THE RATIONAL OPPOSITION"

Summary

1. (SBU) The Liberal Party remains Colombia's strongest political party, winning seven governorships and seven key mayoral seats in the 2007 local elections. Still, the Liberals continue to suffer a long-term decline in overall support, with only 14% of Colombians claiming Liberal affiliation--half the number from the 1980s. The Liberals also suffer internal divisions, with Senator Piedad Cordoba and former President Samper leading a minority left wing while centrist, former President Cesar Gaviria controls the party machinery. The Liberals oppose a referendum that would allow for a third Uribe term. Looking ahead to the 2010 presidential election, Liberals are exploring options for possible coalitions with the center-right Cambio Radical (German Vargas Lleras) or center-left elements of the Polo Democratico Party (Lucho Garzon). Gaviria, former Defense Minister Rafael Pardo, and former presidential candidate Rodrigo Rivera are also considering runs under the Liberal banner. End Summary.

Still the Strongest, But In Decline

2. (U) The Liberal Party, historically Colombia's largest, had the best showing of any party in 2007 local elections--but remains on a downward long-term trajectory. The Party secured seven of 32 gubernatorial seats (Cordoba, Atlantico, Putumayo, Caldas, Cundinamarca, Vichada and Vaupes), and seven key mayoral seats (Santa Marta, Villavicencio, Bucaramanga, Puerto Carreno, Ibague, Tunja and Mitu). Though the Liberals had the best showing of any major Party, the performance continued an overall downward trend that dates from the 1980s. In a September 2008 Gallup poll, 68 percent of Colombians said they did not belong to any political party. Of the 32 percent that do claim party identification, 14 percent identified with the Liberals. This is down from 28% in the 1980s. Former-President Cesar Gaviria told us the party has started to regain ground since dropping its aggressive opposition to President Uribe. Six Liberal Party legislators are under investigation and another six are in jail for alleged paramilitary ties. Splits Persist: Rational v. Radical

3. (C) The Liberal Party, like the leftist Polo Democratico Party, is split between centrists like Gaviria and far left wing members like Senator Piedad Cordoba. The centrist pragmatists, lead by Gaviria, control most of the Party apparatus, and have largely sidelined radical left members such as Cordoba, and former President Samper. Senator

Cecilia Lopez told us the pragmatists represent a "constructive and rational" opposition and support the GOC's democratic security policy to counter the FARC and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Lopez said the radical left is more aligned with Polo Democratico, and condones the actions of the FARC and Chavez to the detriment of the party. Liberal Representative Carlos Piedrahita told us that the party does not support Cordoba, but Gaviria does not want to "make a martyr out of her" by forcing her out.

#### Referendum and Political/Judicial Reform

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¶4. (C) The Liberals are focused on blocking a possible third term for Uribe. Gaviria told us the Liberals will oppose a referendum that would allow a second Uribe reelection, and are considering whether to actively engage in debate over referendum language. Lopez told us that a third Uribe term would damage Colombia's democracy, but Piedrahita and Representative Guillermo Rivera said the party might support a third term referendum if it included language allowing Gaviria to run, or if it only allowed a new Uribe candidacy in 2014 instead of 2010. Still, the Liberal Party walked out of a House debate on political reform on October 7, because the U Party included a new article allowing for previous presidents to run in 2014. Piedrahita stated, "we need to know what the government is up to, if they want re-election in 2014 via the political reform or if they want it in 2010 as stipulated in the referendum."

¶5. (C) The Liberals support political reform legislation to prevent the interference of illegal armed groups in politics, but consider the GOC's draft political reform legislation too weak. Piedrahita and Rivera explained that political parties would not bear any of the responsibility for their members implicated in the para-political scandal under the GOC proposal. The reform stipulates how an implicated member of Congress could be replaced, but does not punish their parties. In June, the Liberals backed political reform legislation that punished parties--legislation later killed by the GOC. Rivera called the new GOC bill a "political distraction" to deflect attention from the third term effort and para-political scandal.

#### Liberal Relations with Uribe

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¶6. (C) The Liberal Party sometimes aggressively criticizes Uribe and his coalition in Congress, but also frequently supports key GOC programs and initiatives. In contrast to the Polo, many Liberals have close ties to Uribe, Cambio Radical and the U Party, since Uribe and key Cambio Radical and U Party leaders are former Liberals. Gaviria noted that the Liberals officially supported the U.S-Colombia Trade Promotion Act (CTPA) along with the coalition parties to the dismay of some left-wing Liberal members. Liberal Senator Camilo Sanchez complained that Gaviria is sometimes viewed as being too close to Uribe, allowing Polo leaders Carlos Gaviria and Senator Gustavo Petro to assume the role of public opposition.

#### Coalition Possibilities are Endless

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¶7. (C) The Liberal Party has numerous options available, on the left or the right, if it chooses to participate in a coalition in the 2010 presidential elections. Former Bogota Mayor and Polo Party founder Lucho Garzon told us he is working with Cesar Gaviria to block an Uribe third term effort. He is also examining a possible alliance between center-left Polo members upset with the far-left tilt of the Polo and the Liberals. Garzon told us that he and Gaviria met on September 11, to discuss options for an open Liberal primary in which Garzon could complete. The two are also considering putting together joint lists for Congressional elections.

¶8. (C) Representative Rivera and Cambio Radical leader and

presidential candidate German Vargas Lleras told us a Cambio-Liberal alliance remained a real possibility. Vargas Lleras said he and most Cambio members are former Liberals. Cambio's political machine in Bogota and on the north coast would also complement the Liberal base. Liberal Senator Carlos Julio Gonzalez, Rivera, and Cambio member and House of Representatives President German Varon told us that Cambio Radical was the most likely Liberal partner in 2010. Since his return from Spain in mid-September, Vargas Lleras has distanced himself from the GOC coalition and begun his presidential campaign. Vargas Lleras is also trying to push Uribe to publicly state his reelection intentions. Vargas Lleras also told us the fate of a third term amendment (now under consideration in Congress) lies with Cambio Radical which controls the "swing" votes in Congress.

19. (SBU) Despite the coalition discussions, other Liberals told us the party "outsider" status of Garzon and Vargas Lleras makes them longshot Liberal party options. Many Liberals would prefer to support a party insider in 2010. Gaviria is said to be considering a run, but only if Uribe--considered almost unbeatable--steps aside. Other leading Liberal candidates include former Defense Minister and political columnist Rafael Pardo, former Prosecutor General Alfonso Gomez Mendez, Senator Cecilia Lopez, and former presidential candidate Rodrigo Rivera.

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